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NASIS

NEBRASKA'S CHILDREN --

LEARNING TO WORK

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NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NEBRASKA'S CHILDREN --

LEARNING TO WORK

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Price: $ .75

The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

Lynn K. White: 1979 Study Director

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the third Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

In 1979 a representative sample of 1882 Nebraskans eighteen years of age or older living in households was interviewed by telephone. The respondents to the 1979 survey are part of a panel originally selected and interviewed in 1977 and 1978. They will be re-interviewed every two years in order to provide information on changing quality of life. The interviews averaged approximately 40 minutes and included questions about environment, health, crime, political attitudes, occupation, education, family life and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, 95 out of 100 times the percentages computed from the items asked on the survey are likely to be accurate to within plus or minus 2.3 percent of the figure that would have been obtained if each adult in Nebraska had been surveyed. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any users and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Director.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, The Bureau of Sociological Research, and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include interviewing a new sample of Nebraskans in 1980 as well as continuing to re-interview the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting Lynn K. White, NASIS Study Director, at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1980 NASIS Prospectus.

"Nobody else at school has to work as hard as I do."

"All my friends get more allowance than me."

These are familiar remarks to most parents. And, though parents may have their suspicions, they seldom have the information to provide direct evidence that their children aren't really overworked or underpaid. This report summarizes children's work and children's earnings for a random sample of 800 children in Nebraska. It provides answers to these and other questions and also provides a picture of the transmission of the work ethic from one generation to the next.

The work of children does not receive much attention these days. Most people, if asked, would say that the work of children is schoolwork. Yet children do work. They empty the trash, vacuum the rug, sweep the garage, and tend the chickens. This work is important. But the work of children is significant over and above the amount of work accomplished, for it represents training in what will be a life-long activity for many of them: work.

Study Design

The data for this study are based on a random sample of 800 children and their parents living in the state of Nebraska and are taken from the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey conducted in the Spring of 1979. The sample represents all ages from 0 to 17, both sexes, farm kids and urban kids, kids from all social classes and settings.

Data for this study are based on parental reports. Using the name of the randomly selected child, telephone interviewers asked parents the following questions:

> Is (CHILD'S NAME) regularly required to do chores around the house or yard? (IF FARM, INCLUDES FARM WORK). If yes,
>
> What are these? (PROBE: ARE THERE ANY OTHERS?)

In an average week, how many hours would you say (CHILD'S NAME) spends doing these chores?

Parents have a lot of different reasons for asking their children to do work around the house. Why do you ask your children to work? (PROBE: ARE THERE ANY OTHER REASONS?)

Does (CHILD'S NAME) receive a regular allowance? If yes,

How much is this per week?

Findings

Do children work these days? Our data indicate that the answer is "yes, but not too hard." In our sample, 80 percent of the children regularly do chores around the house and yard (see Table 1). The distributions by age show that this is clearly a developmental process, ranging from 40 percent of the children under 5 to 93 percent of those over 15. In fact, the process of introducing children to the world of work begins in some households almost in infancy: 14 percent of the children aged 1 year were said to have regular household chores.

If we look at the amount of time children spend doing chores around the household we find that it is not extensive, but that it does increase with age: whereas children under 5 are estimated to spend only two hours per week doing chores, older children are estimated to spend approximately five hours per week. There is a substantial sex difference here, showing that girls spend more hours around the house than do boys.

The data in Table 1 on allowances are somewhat surprising. More than half of all the children in Nebraska do not receive a regular allowance. Those that do get an allowance receive less than a princely amount: the average allowance for kids in Nebraska is $1.25 per week, reaching a high of $5 per week among older teenagers. Before anyone concludes, "Ha! Half of the kids in Nebraska don't even get an allowance," we should note that getting an allowance appears to be a middle-class phenomenon and does not, by any means, include all of the money

transfers from parent to child. Both children whose parents are poor and those whose parents are well off are less likely than middle-class children to get an allowance. Presumably, at least among the better off, the transfer of money is taken care of more casually in the form of a couple of dollars for the movie, etc.

Differentials in Children's Work

In addition to documenting a developmental process, we are also concerned about background factors which influence the extent to which children are socialized into work. Table 2 presents distributions on percent doing household chores and median hours spent on chores by five important background variables: mother's employment, number of children in the household, family income, religion, and residence.

The data indicate that, for all of these except residence, there are important differences in the extent to which children have work experience. As expected, and as indicated in other studies, children with working mothers are more likely to have chores around the house and to spend more hours at them. Further analysis (not shown in this table) indicates that children of working mothers are also more likely to have outside employment themselves. This finding holds up under a control for family income and suggests that a family work ethic rather than economic stress may be at work.

As expected, children from larger families are more likely to be required to do chores, although they don't spend any longer at them than children from smaller families. Families with higher incomes are also more likely to require their children to do chores around the household. In part this may be due to the fact that many families with higher incomes also have an employed mother, which, by itself, leads to longer hours of household work for the children. Yet this same pattern of higher status being associated with greater work experience also shows up when status is measured by occupational prestige of mother or of father, or by

by mother's or father's education. Thus it appears that higher-status parents are more insistent on giving their children experience with work.

The most surprising finding in Table 2 is that farm children are, if anything, less likely to have work experience than are city kids. The difference is small, however, and farm kids do work more hours than city kids. The surprising factor is that there is so little difference. In one of the few prior studies of children's work, Strauss (1962) compared urban and farm boys and found that while farm boys were only a little more apt to have regular chores than city kids, they worked much longer hours: 60 percent regularly worked 20 hours or more a week. In part the discrepancy in these findings is due to the fact that our data represent all ages and both sexes. If we look only at 15-17 year old boys, we do find that the median hours worked is 10 for farm boys and 4 for city boys: only 10 percent of the farm boys, however, were working 20 hours or more a week in our sample. The differences may also be partly attributed to the time of year during which our survey was conducted, February through April, a time when farm chores are just gearing up for the new season. Even with these explanations, it appears possible that just as farm wives are giving up kitchen gardens for the convenience of the supermarket, farmers may be giving up the unskilled labor of their children in favor of mechanized labor.

Reasons for Children's Work

Our interviews with parents indicate that parents are quite clear about their role in preparing their children for work. All parents of children who had regular chores were asked why they asked their children to work. For most parents the key word was "responsibility." In fact, over one-quarter of the parents spontaneously used the word "responsibility" in their reply. Regardless of the specific language, most parents gave character building as the primary reason for giving their children chores. We quote responses from parents:

> "Because he's a member of the family, because there's too much work for me to do it all. The main reason is that he has to be responsible and I would be very derelict as a parent not to."
>
> "So they'll know how to work. They have a future of it too and they're not going anywhere if they don't."
>
> "I think it develops the character. Unless they do it, it won't get done. It builds their responsibility, his own responsibility, toward others."

Relatively few parents said that the reason they asked their children to work was because their services were required. Instead, several explicitly noted that the chores were assigned for the child's benefit rather than their own. As Strauss (1962) noted twenty years ago, assigning chores to a young child and then helping or supervising the child with that chore is often more trouble than doing it oneself. Giving children work, then, is seen by most parents as a duty and not as a way to unload unwanted chores.

The Duties of Children

In evaluating the work experience which is gained in the family we are interested not only in whether children work, but also in what they work at. In asking parents to describe the work of their children, we used a simple open-ended question, "What does (CHILD'S NAME) do?" followed by a probe, "Is there anything else?" This kind of question does not elicit a complete list of children's chores but rather their more salient tasks. For example, three-quarters of the parents of children under 5 said that one of their child's chores was to pick up after her/himself; only 1 percent of the parents of teenagers listed this as a chore. Most probably these older children are still required to pick up after themselves, but parents are likely to begin taking this for granted and to focus on more responsible chores such as mowing the lawn or baking. The answers to this open-ended question were classified in 18 specific chores. Table 3 presents, by age and sex, the percent of children who are reported doing each task. The percentages in the first

row of each general category of work summarize the percentage who do any of these kinds of chores. For example, 46% of the children who have chores do some kind of outdoor work.

Overall the chores children are most likely to do are to clean their own rooms, do general housework, take care of the dishes, take out the garbage, do miscellaneous yardwork, and mow the lawn. Within categories of work there are important variations by age, and, most impressively, by sex.

There are some chores which begin rather evenly distributed and end up strongly sex-typed. This is most obvious in the total category of kitchen work, where 28 percent of both boys and girls are involved at ages 0-4, but, while boys never increase their participation, girls, by age 15-17, move up to 68 percent. This is true to a lesser extent in laundry, cooking, miscellaneous kitchen work, and taking out the garbage. In all of these but the last boys are much less involved during adolescence. The garbage, however, seems to become more "manly" as children mature.

Because most of the chores to be done around the average household are traditionally women's work or, as these data would indicate, girl's work, this sex-typed division of labor leads to the fact that we noted earlier: girls put in more hours on their chores than do boys. As girls are also more likely to have employment outside of the home, we are led to the conclusion that childhood is a period of longer work for girls than boys. This parallels surveys on adults which suggest that, when adults have equivalent outside obligations, women put in more time around the house than do men (Hedges and Barnett, 1972). This conclusion, though, provocative, should be tempered by the fact that this survey was undertaken in early Spring (February through April) when the more masculine chores of mowing lawns and shoveling snow are both at an ebb.

Conclusions

Our data lead to the conclusion that within the American family work experiences tend to be developmental and nearly universal, both the hours of work and the responsibility of the task increase with age until well over 90 percent of all children are involved in household chores. While these data present a picture of children being trained for the world of work, for only a minority of the children in our sample does the work they do at home represent an apprenticeship into particular skills which they will use in earning a living. Rather the training is more diffuse and appears to be related to teaching values and attitudes necessary to holding a job and to the mundane skills necessary to maintain a household.

References

Strauss, Murray. 1962. "Work roles and financial responsibility in the socialization of farm, fringe, and town boys." Rural Sociology 27 (September): 257-274.

TABLE 1.

Percent of Children Regularly Required to do Chores, Median Hours Spent on Chores, and Percent with Allowances and Median Allowances by Age and Sex.

	Household Chores		Allowances		
Age and Sex	Percent	Of Those With Chores, Median Hours	Percent	Of Those With Allowances, Median $	Number
Total	80%	4.0	34%	1.30	800
Boys	82	3.4	35	1.95	409
0 - 4	40	2.1	19	0.50	99
5 - 9	91	2.3	50	1.00	104
10 - 14	98	4.1	50	2.00	124
15 - 17	94	4.2	47	4.80	82
Girls	78	4.6	32	1.00	389
0 - 4	36	1.7	22	0.30	92
5 - 9	87	4.0	50	0.50	106
10 - 14	92	4.7	50	2.00	98
15 - 17	93	6.1	44	5.00	84

TABLE 2.

Percent of Children Regularly Required to do Chores, and Median Hours Spent on Chores, by Background Variables.

Background Variable	Household Chores		
	Percent	Of Those With Chores, Median Hours	Number
Mother's Employment			
None	78	3.7	402
Part-time	79	3.8	179
Full-time	84	4.1	210
Number of Children in the Home			
1	70	4.4	133
2	76	3.2	273
3	84	4.3	201
4	87	4.5	105
5	91	4.6	80
Household Income			
Under $15,000	74	4.4	186
$15,000 - $25,000	79	4.3	295
Over $25,000	80	3.6	187
Religion			
Protestant	77	3.9	521
Catholic	86	4.3	234
Other	79	5.0	33
Residence			
Rural Farm	73	5.1	131
Rural Non-Farm	78	4.0	171
Urban	81	3.8	489

TABLE 3.

Percent of Children with Chores Doing Each Type of Chore, by Age and Sex, N = 622.

Type of Chore	MALES 0-4	MALES 5-9	MALES 10-14	MALES 15-17	FEMALES 0-4	FEMALES 5-9	FEMALES 10-14	FEMALES 15-17	Total
Outdoor Chores	7%	43%	79%	80%	0%	20%	47%	37%	46%
Lawn	0	9	57	48	0	1	17	19	23
Snow Shoveling	0	17	46	35	0	3	6	6	18
Weed and Trim	0	2	5	5	0	4	2	2	3
Misc. Yard Work	7	26	36	38	0	15	34	20	26
Housework	17%	34%	36%	33%	31%	48%	73%	84%	47%
Bathrooms	0	0	2	0	0	3	3	6	2
Laundry	11	11	9	6	19	20	25	32	16
Misc. Housework	9	25	30	29	17	38	67	77	39
Take Care of Self	90%	67%	54%	49%	87%	84%	56%	50%	64%
Clean Own Room	18	55	54	49	34	78	57	50	53
Pick Up After Self	79	19	0	1	57	16	2	2	14
Kitchen	28%	31%	29%	30%	28%	61%	75%	68%	46%
Dishes	13	20	22	27	17	46	59	47	33
Set or Clear Table	19	14	7	1	16	22	13	1	10
Cook or Bake	1	2	2	6	0	7	22	27	9
Misc. Kitchen	4	0	0	0	0	2	5	10	3
Take Care of Pets	2%	17%	18%	7%	4%	18%	10%	15%	13%
Babysit	3%	4%	2%	2%	0%	8%	3%	8%	4%
Garbage	14%	50%	57%	46%	11%	23%	18%	4%	32%
Farm	3%	7%	16%	18%	0%	6%	10%	15%	11%
Animals	2	7	15	16	0	6	9	14	10
Misc. Farm	1	3	4	8	0	0	2	5	3

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1979 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1979 NASIS. Lynn K. White. Price: $7.50.
2	Taxes: Are They Fair? Susan Welch and Alan Booth. Price: $ .50.

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